

SYNOPSIS.

Peter Knight, defeated for political office in his town, decides to venture New York in order that the family fortune might benefit by the expected rise of his charming daughter, Lorelei. A well-known critic interviews Lorelei Knight, now stage beauty with Bergman's Review, for a special article. Her coin-hunting mother outlines Lorelei's ambitions, but Emerson, the press agent, later adds his information. Lorelei attends Millionaire Hammon's gorgeous entertainment. She meets Merkle, a wealthy dyspeptic. Bob Wharton comes uninvited. Lorelei discovers a blackmail plot against Hammon, in which her brother is involved. Merkle and Lorelei have an auto wreck. The blackmailers besmirch her good name. Lorelei learns her mother is an unscrupulous plotter. She finds in Adoree Demorest a real friend, and finds Bob Wharton is likable. Lorelei leaves her family and goes to live alone. Lorelei and drunken Bob Wharton are tricked into marriage.

Wondering how she can possibly escape the drunken carresses of her new husband the first night of their marriage, Lorelei finds the problem suddenly solved for her—but in a ghastly manner. The demons of blackmail and intrigue which have followed her give way to devils of bloodshed and murder. How she acts in a tragic crisis is told in Rex Beach's best style in this installment.

Bob Wharton and his bride and Lillas and Jimmy Knight are in Lillas' apartment celebrating the wedding when Hammon enters. He and Lillas are quarreling.

CHAPTER XIV—Continued.

During this angry scene Lillas had not risen nor spoken. Her eyes were very black and very brilliant against her pallor, and she was smiling deviously.

"Wait!" she interposed. "I'm not going to stay here with this old—fool." Hammon grew purple; he ground his teeth.

"You shall stay. We're going to have a talk and settle things once for all."

Lillas rose swiftly with a complete change of manner; she was smiling no longer; her face was sinister.

"Very well," she agreed. "Tonight. Why not? But I want Lorelei to stay and—hear. Yes."

"No, I don't want her."

"I do," Lillas' bad temper flared up promptly from the hot coals of spiteful, drunken stubbornness. "She'll stay till you go, or else I'll put you out too. I don't trust you." She laughed disagreeably.

"Then have your way. It's you I want to talk with, anyhow, drunk as you are. Now, Bob—will you say goodnight?" He waved the two men from the room, and the outer door closed behind them.

Lorelei had little desire to remain as the witness to a distressing scene, but she seized upon the delay, for even a sordid lovers' quarrel was preferable to the carresses of a sudden bridegroom. But daylight seemed a long way off—she feared Bob would not fall asleep during this brief respite.

"Now come with me, if you please," Hammon turned in the direction of the library, and Lillas followed, pausing to light a cigarette with a studied indifference that added fuel to his rage. Lorelei seated herself at the disordered dining table and stared miserably at the wall.

"Well?" said Hammon, when he and Lillas were alone. "Is this how you live up to your promises?"

"How did you know I went out tonight?" she inquired in her turn.

"I had you watched. After what happened last night I was suspicious."



"Are You Just Drunk?" He Said.

"I've been waiting for hours—while you were out with that grafter, drinking, carousing—"

He bent toward her, white with fury, but she blew the smoke from her cigarette into his face, and he checked himself, staring at her strangely. She had seated herself upon the edge of the reading table, one foot swinging idly. She watched him with a brooding, insolent amusement.

"Are you just drunk," he said, unaccountably, "—have you completely lost your senses?"

"Yes, I'm drunk. What are you going to do about it?"

"—I can't talk like that!"

The Auction Block

A NOVEL OF NEW YORK LIFE

By REX BEACH

ILLUSTRATIONS By F. PARKER

Author of
"The Iron Trail"
"The Spoilers"
"The Silver Horde" Etc.

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"You're not yourself, Lillas." He ran his eyes over the luxurious little room; he wiped his face with a shaky hand, feeling that it was he who had lost his senses. "The wine is talking. When I asked you to marry me I never dreamed—"

She eyed him silently with an expression he could not fathom, then asked, "Tell me, do you really care for me?"

Jarvis Hammon was a virile, headstrong man; his world had come suddenly, inexplicably to an end. His voice was hoarse, as he answered:

"Do you think I'd have made a fool of myself if I hadn't? Do you think I'd have ruined myself?"

"Have you ruined yourself?" she interrupted, quickly.

"Not quite, perhaps; but what I've lost, what I've sacrificed, would have ruined most men. My home is gone, and my family—as you know—yes, and a good many other things you don't know about. Financially I'm not done for—"

"That's too bad."

"Eh? I don't understand. What are you getting at?"

"I'll tell you. I never intended to marry you, Jarvis."

He started as if she had struck him.

"That's what I said," she reaffirmed, "and I'll tell you why. Look at me—close."

He did as she directed, but saw nothing, his mind being in chaos. It had been her intention to call Lorelei to witness this dramatic disclosure and thus enhance its effect, but in the excitement of the moment she forgot.

"Look at me," she repeated. "I'm Lily Levinski."

"Levinski. A Jew?" he exclaimed, in naive surprise.

"Yes. I'm Joe Levinski's girl. Do you remember?"

"A Jew!" It was plain that the name meant nothing.

She slid down from her perch and approached him, crying roughly, "Don't you remember Joe Levinski?"

Hammon shook his head. "He worked for you in the Bessemer plant of the old Kingman mill. Don't you remember?"

"There were four thousand men—"

"He was killed when the converter dumped. You were rushing the work. Do you remember now?" Her words came swift and shrill.

Hammon started; a frown drew his brows together. His mind groped back through the years, and memory faintly stirred, but she gave him no leisure to speak.

"I was waiting outside with his dinner bucket, along with the other women. I saw him go. I saw you kill him—"

"Lillas! Good God, are you crazy?" he burst forth.

"It was murder."

"Murder?"

"It was. You did it. You killed him." She had dropped her cigarette, and it burned a black scar into the rug at their feet. Hammon retreated a step, the girl followed with blazing eyes and words that were hot with hate. "You spilled that melted steel on him, and I saw it all. When I grew up I prayed for a chance to get even, for his sake and for the sake of the other hunkies you killed. You killed my mother, too, Jarvis Hammon, and made me a—"

"Be quiet!" he commanded, roughly. "The thing's incredible—absurd. You—the daughter of one of my workmen—and a Jew!"

"Yes, Levinski—Lily Levinski. And you wanted to marry me," she gibed. "But I fooled you."

"I guess I must be—out of my head. I never knew the man—there were thousands of them; accidents were common. But—you say—"

He gathered his whirling thoughts, and, strangely enough, grew calm. "You say you prayed for a chance to get even—So, then, you've been humbugging—By God, I don't believe it!"

"It's true. It's true. It's true," shrilled the girl so hysterically that her voice roused Lorelei, sitting vacantly in the room down the hall, and brought her to her feet with ears suddenly strained. Lorelei could hear only a part of the words that followed, but the tones of the two voices drew her from her retreat and toward the front of the apartment.

"I knew you," Lillas was saying. "I figured it all out, and—you were easy. You were a bigger fool than I dreamed."

"You took my money—you let me support you!" cried Hammon, in bitter accusation.

"Oh, I did more than that. I planned everything that has happened to you, even that blackmail."

"Blackmail!" he shouted. Did you—was that your—?" He grew suddenly apoplectic; his eyes distended and reddened with rage.

His dismay delighted her.

"Certainly," she smiled. "Half the money is in my bank at this minute—besides all the rest you've given me. Oh, I've got enough to live on without marrying you. Who do you think put your wife wise and gave her the evidence for her divorce, eh? Think it over. Do you remember those letters? You were very indiscreet—and—"

Your wife will read them and your daughters—"

Jarvis Hammon roused himself at last. Surprise, incredulity, dismay gave place to fury, and, as in all primitive natures, his wrath took shape as an impulse to destroy.

"You'll—do that—eh?" His tone, his bearing were threatening. He advanced as if to seize her in his great hands, and only her quickness saved her.

"Don't touch me!" Her voice ended in a little shriek as she evaded a second effort to grasp her, and placed the table between them. "What do you—mean?"

But it seemed that she had done her work too well, for his answer was like

voice inside, raised in the best of humor. Evidently he was telephoning.

"Yes. Two hours ago, I tell you. With book, bell and candle."

Jim's footsteps sounded, his arm flew out opened the door, then his arm flew out to his sister's support as she staggered in.

"Sis! What—" he cried at sight of her.

"Something—dreadful."

Bob continued his cheerful colloquy over the wire. "Say! Here she is now. We'll expect a marble clock with gilt cupids from you, Merkle— Want to say hello?" He lurched aside from the telephone as Lorelei snatched the receiver from his hand.

"Mr. Merkle," she cried.

"Hello! Yes. Is that you?" came Merkle's steady voice.

"Come quick—quick."

"What's wrong?" he demanded, with a sharp change of tone. "Has Bob—?"

"No, no. It's Mr. Hammon. He's downstairs with—Lillas, and he's hurt—shot. I—I'm frightened."

She turned to find Bob and Jim staring at her.

"Come," she gasped. "I think he's—dying."

She led the way swiftly, and they followed.

CHAPTER XV.

Merkle found his chauffeur just closing the garage door, and three minutes later his car was sweeping westward through the park like the shadow of some flying bird. The vagueness, the brevity of the message that had come to him out of the night made it terribly alarming. Jarvis Hammon's financial interests were in no condition to withstand a shock; for a long time many of them had been under fire. He had committed his associates to a program of commercial expansion, never too secure even under favorable conditions, and one, moreover, which had provoked a tremendous assault from rival steel manufacturers. Now, with Hammon himself stricken at the crisis of the struggle, there was no telling what results might follow.

But Merkle's apprehensions were by no means purely selfish. Hammon and he had been friends for many years; they shared a mutual respect and affection, and, although Merkle was eminently practical and unemotional, he prayed now as best he could that Hammon might not be grievously injured.

As the machine drew up to the Elegancia, Jimmy Knight leaped to the running board and said hurriedly:

"Send your driver away."

Merkle did as he was directed, realizing his worst fears. When he and Jim stood alone on the walk he inquired weakly, "Is he—dead?"

Jim shook his head, and Merkle saw that he was deeply agitated. "No. But he's got a bullet in his chest."

Together the men entered the building and at the first ring were admitted to Apartment No. 1 by Lorelei herself. She led them straight into the library.

Perhaps a quarter of an hour had elapsed since the shooting, but Jarvis Hammon still sat in the big chair. He was breathing quietly. Bob Wharton stood beside him.

"John!" The ironmaster smiled pallidly as his friend came and knelt beside him. "You got here quickly."

"Are you badly hurt, Jarvis?"

"The thing is in here somewhere," Hammon took his hand away from his breast, and Merkle saw that the fingers were bloody. "Can you get me out of here quietly?"

John Merkle rose to his full height, his lips writhed back from his teeth. Harshly he inquired: "Where is that woman?"

"She's back yonder in her room," Bob told him. "She's ill."

Merkle turned, but, reading his intent, Hammon checked him, crying in a strong voice: "None of that, John. I did it myself. It was an—accident."

"I don't believe it."

Hammon's eyes met those of his accuser; the two stared at each other steadily for a moment.

The other occupants of the room had listened breathlessly; now Lorelei stirred and Merkle read more than mere bewilderment in her face. He opened his lips, but the wounded man did not wait for him to speak.

"You must believe me!" he said, earnestly. "It's the truth, and I won't have Lillas involved—we've been a great deal to each other. Tonight—I accused her wrongfully. It was all my fault—I'm to blame for everything."

There was a pause. "Now get me out of here as quietly and quickly as you can. I'm really not hurt much. Come, come! There's nobody home except Orson and some of the kitchen help, and Orson is all right—the women are gone, you know. He'll get a doctor. It's a—bad business, of course, but I've thought it all out, and you must do exactly as I say."

The effort of this long speech told on the sufferer.

Sweat beads his face; nevertheless, his jaws remained firmly set; his glance was purposeful, his big hands were gripped tightly over the arms of the chair. There was something su-

perb, something terrible about his unchanging grimace.

"Is your car outside, John?" he asked.

Merkle shook his head. He was thinking swiftly. "I wouldn't dare risk that, anyhow. The driver is a new man."

"Get a cab," Jim offered, in a panic. "The cab driver would be sure to—"

"I'll drive," Bob volunteered. "I'm drunk, but I've done it before when I was drunker. It's an old trick of mine—sort of a joke, see? Give me some money—a cabby'll do anything for money at this time o' night."

Merkle eyed the speaker in momentary doubt, then handed him a roll of bank-notes. "It's a serious business, Bob, but Jarvis can't stay here. There's somebody else to consider besides us—and—Miss Lynn. I'm thinking about Mrs. Hammon and the girls." He followed Bob to the door and let him out, stepped swiftly down the hall, then, without knocking, opened the door to Lillas Lynn's bedroom and entered.

Lillas was busied at her dressing. At his entrance she uttered a frightened cry and a silver spoon slipped from her nervous fingers. Merkle saw a little open box, a glass of water, the cap of a pearl-and-gold fountain pen, but took scant notice of them, being too deeply stirred and too much surprised at her appearance. She was no longer the vital, dashing girl he had known, but a pallid, cowering wreck of a woman. She shrank back at sight of him, babbling unintelligible words and covering as if expecting a blow.

"Did you shoot him?" he asked, grimly.

Shivering, choking, speechless, Lillas stared at him. A repetition of his question brought no reply.

Seizing her roughly, he shook her, muttering savagely:

"If I were sure, by God, I'd strangle you!"

She remained limp; her expressionless stare did not change.

Merkle heard a stir behind him and found Jimmy Knight's blanched face peering in at him. Even fright could not entirely rob the younger man's features of their sly inquisitiveness.

"Mr. Hammon's calling you," said Jim, then blinked at the wretchedly disheveled woman.

"Here!" Merkle beckoned him with a jerk of his head. This girl must get away from here. She'll ruin everything in her condition. Try to put her in some kind of shape while Lorelei packs her bag. We had better get her out of the country if we can."

Jim's quick eyes took in the articles on the dressing table. "Ha! Dope," he exclaimed. "She's a coker—she's filled herself up. But, say—you don't really think she—did it, do you?"

"I don't know what to think. It's just as bad, either way. Hammon's wife and daughters must never know. Now, quick. See what you can do with her."

Merkle returned to the library, sent Lorelei in to her brother's assistance, then scanned his friend's face anxiously. But Hammon had not moved; the sweat still stood upon his lips and forehead, his jaws were still set like stone.

Several months before, Bob Wharton, during one of his hilarious moments, had conceived the brilliant notion of hiring a four-wheeler and driving a convivial party of friends from place to place. The success of his exploit had been so gratifying that he had repeated the performance, but he was in a far different mood now as he left the Elegancia. The shock of Lorelei's announcement, the sight of his stricken friend, had sobered him considerably, yet he was not himself by any means. At one moment he saw and reasoned clearly, at the next his intoxication benumbed his senses and distorted his mental vision. For once in his life he wished himself sober.

Broadway, that pulsating artery of New York life, was still flowing a thin stream of traffic despite the lateness of the hour, and Bob's mind had become clearer by the time he reached it. Several taxicabs whirled past, both north and south bound, but he knew better than to hire them, so he waited as patiently as he could while those billows of intoxication continued to ebb and flow through his brain, robbing him of that careful judgment which he fought to retain.

At last the clop-clop-clop of a horse's hoofs sounded close by, and an unshaven man in an ancient high hat steered a four-wheeler to the curb, barking, "Keb, keb!"

Bob lurched forward and laid a hand upon the driver's knee. "Very man I'm lookin' for." The hiccup that followed was by no means intentional.

"Yes, sir. Where to, sir?"

But Bob shook his head vigorously and waved a comprehensive gesture toward the west. "Got a party of my own back yonder—everybody soused but me—understand? I'm the only sober one, so I'm goin' to drive 'em home, see? How much?"

"How much for what?" demanded the cabman.

"For the cab—one hour. I'll bring it back."

Nothing except Bob's personal appearance prevented the driver from whipping up without more ado. The night was old—and these jokers sometimes pay well, the man reflected.

"How'd I know you'd bring it back?" he inquired.

"Matter of honor with me. I'll be back in no time. Will ten dollars be right? I'll make it fifteen, and you can lend me your coat and hat. We'll exchange—have to, or no joke. Is it a go?"

The offer was tempting, but the driver could not demand Wharton's name and address before committing himself. The card that Bob handed him put an end to the parley; he wheeled into the side street and removed his long, nickel-buttoned coat and his battered felt, taking Bob's broadcloth and well-blocked hat in return.

"First one o' these I ever had on," he chuckled. "If you ain't back I'll take these glad rags to Charley Volce's hotel, eh?"

"Right! The Charlevoix. But I'll be back." Bob drove away with a parting flourish of his whip.

The elevator was in its place, the hall-man dozing, when Wharton entered the Elegancia and rang the bell of Lillas Lynn's apartment. Once he had gained admittance little time was wasted. He and Merkle helped Hammon to his feet, then each took an arm; but the exertion told, and Jarvis hung between them like a drunken man, a gray look of death upon his face.

"Watch out for the door-man," Jimmy Knight cautioned for the twentieth time. "Make him think you've got a source."

"Aren't you coming along?" asked Bob.

But Jim recoiled. "Me? No. I'll stay and help Lillas make her getaway."

Merkle nodded agreement. "Don't let her get out of your sight, either, understand? There's a ship sailing in the morning. See that she's aboard."

Jarvis Hammon spoke. "I want you all to know that I'm entirely to blame and that I did this myself. Lillas is a—good girl." The words came laboriously, but his heavy brows were drawn down, his jaw was square. "I was clumsy. I might have killed her. But she's all right, and I'll be all right, too, when I get a doctor. Now put that pistol in my pocket, John. Do as I say. There! Now I'm ready."

Bob Wharton mounted the box and drove to Central Park West. At Sixty-seventh street he wheeled into the sunken causeway that links the East and West sides.

Once in the shadows, Merkle leaned from the door, crying softly, "Faster! Faster!"

Bob whipped up, the horse cantered, the cab reeled and bounced over the cobblestones, rocking the wounded man pitifully.

To John Merkle the ride was terrible, with a drunkard at the reins and in his arms a perhaps fatally injured man, who, despite the tortures of that bumping carriage, interspersed his groans with cries of "Hurry, hurry!" When he felt the grateful smoothness of Fifth Avenue beneath the wheels he

leaped forth a second time and warned Bob. "Be careful of the watchman in the block."

The liquor in Bob was dying; he bent downward to inquire, "Is he all right?"

Merkle nodded, then withdrew his head.

The Hammon residence has changed owners of late, but many people recall its tragic associations and continue to point it out with interest. It is a massive pile of gray stone, standing just east of Fifth Avenue, and its bronze doors open upon an exclusive, well-kept side street. At the farther corner, dimly discernible beneath the radiance of a street light, Bob made out the watchman, now at the end of his patrol. The moment was propitious; there could be no further delay.

Do you believe Lillas is really guilty—was she justified? And do you think that Jimmy Knight will use this occasion to collect blackmail money?

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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